

# LAOIS PARTNERSHIP COMMUNITY BIODIVERSITY TRAINING PROJECT 2013-2014 – FINAL REPORT

## Biodiversity

**Lovely Laois—Discover  
the Wild Side of Your  
Home Place!**

**Biodiversity in your community with  
Laois Partnership and Laois Ecologist  
Dr Fiona MacGowan.**



The training is provided by Kearney Consultants and Trainers on behalf of **Laois Partnership Company** and the course content will be co-ordinated by **Dr Fiona MacGowan**.



For Further information or to register your interest, contact Cammy at [biodiversitytraining123@gmail.com](mailto:biodiversitytraining123@gmail.com) or call 087-9434126 or find Laois Biodiversity on facebook.



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## Preamble

Laois Partnership Co. contracted Kearney Consultants & Trainers and MacGowan Associates in Spring, 2013 to undertake this innovative project on their behalf. The project was identified by the partnership as a result of their long-term activity in the county and involvement in environment, heritage, tourism and conservation projects. They recognised that many individuals and organisations were interested in building their knowledge and skills in planning projects to support sustainable community development. By designing and delivering comprehensive training in biodiversity it was envisaged that individuals' and communities' awareness and capacity of appropriate biodiversity planning and interventions would be enhanced. Kearney Consultants & Trainers had experience of training design and delivery and Dr. Fiona MacGowan had the knowledge base to inform the training content. Pre-planning discussions commenced in February, 2013 and led to the development of a training programme, the experience of which is discussed below.

## Phase 1

Phase 1 was launched on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2013 at Vicarstown with the key note speaker being Dr. Eanna Ni Lamhna who also led a walkabout. Others who attended included representatives of Laois Partnership, the Co. Council and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The event included a presentation by the trainers of what was involved in the proposed training. The profile of participants at the event was varied with representatives from community organisations, environment groups, tidy towns' organisations and individuals with a strong interest in biodiversity, environment and conservation. We advised those who attended that we would be circulating information on the training in the coming weeks and we took their names to let them know about the training schedule.

Following the launch, we prepared a schedule to deliver training in five locations around Co. Laois. We would like to have delivered the training in more places but this was not logistically viable. We were mindful, therefore, and after discussions with the partnership, to spread the training around the county as much as possible. Five locations were selected – Vicarstown, Ballyroan, Ballacolla, Camross and Graiguecullen.

We developed a database of people and organisations who were likely to be interested in this initiative. The database also included contact details for schools, for further education centres, for FÁS CE, TÚS, for local media, for professionals etc. We then contacted people by email and telephone as well as through mail shots containing information on the proposed training.

Information brochures and a local media promotions' campaign were prepared to raise awareness of the project. (The title page of this report contains the front and back covers of the brochure). A radio campaign was undertaken and notices were placed in The Laois Nationalist, The Leinster Express and local newsletters in and around each of the participating communities. This promotional activity carried on from early May, 2013 to early July, 2013 and was carried out by staff at Kearney Consultants & Trainers' offices and by Dr. MacGowan. A considerable amount of time was devoted to this activity.

The timing of the roll-out of the project was challenging – the project would have benefitted from an earlier start (probably late January 2013) which would have allowed us to start training delivery immediately after Easter 2013. As it was, we had 6 weeks to deliver training – from early June to early July. It was sometimes difficult to engage those who would be interested as some were withdrawing from community activities during June, some were completing their work years (e.g. Primary School Teachers) and others were beginning to strongly focus on activities for the impending adjudicating of Tidy Towns' Committees' efforts in their respective communities.

Nevertheless, the experience of training delivery was very worthwhile, according to participants' evaluation of their involvement (copies of evaluation sheets are available). Dr. MacGowan conducted 3 training workshops in each location. The workshops consisted of her raising awareness of biodiversity themes and topics, demonstration, practical interaction, walkabouts and question

and answer opportunities. The participants at these workshops came from a variety of backgrounds. Some people knew very little about biodiversity and some who had a lot of knowledge. The workshops were a great opportunity for people to meet and for cross-fertilisation of ideas. Content included introduction to terminology, presentation of various plants, and distribution of information leaflets prepared by various agencies, inputs by Dr. Chris Uys and led by Dr. MacGowan.

Average attendance at each of the workshops varied between 5 people and 14 people. Participants then attended a collective field trip in July 2013 where all the ideas, topics and issues covered in the workshops were focused upon in the visit to Abbeyleix Bog. Thirty people attended this field trip. They were told about the next phase to commence in Autumn, 2013.

## Phase 2

Phase 2 was launched in St. Patrick's Hall, Ballacolla in October, 2013 following its promotion amongst all previous participants and contact with a cross-section of people on the project database. Participants were directly targeted rather than a general promotional campaign as it was believed that this would increase interest and subsequent buy-in. Thirty nine people attended this event and included representatives of Tidy Towns' Committees – including some who had not previously attended – individuals who had attended the pre-summer training and professionals.

This event included presentations by Éamonn De Stafort (National Tidy Towns' Adjudicator), Rita Kearney and Dr. Fiona MacGowan, Ecologist. Dr. MacGowan made a presentation at the launch explaining the concept of Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) and their relevance for local communities. The event was very interactive, enjoyable and followed by light refreshments and people were invited to sign up for the planned training.

Several groups requested that a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) be drawn up for their community. The list was as follows: Abbeyleix, Ballacolla, Cullohill, Emo, Killenard, Mountmellick and Portarlinton. This short report summarises activities undertaken by Dr. MacGowan to progress the BAP preparations.

Following this event, Dr. MacGowan began work on preparing a basic Biodiversity Action Plan template based on international best practice and bearing in mind the profile of stakeholders who would use the plans to inform their future activities. The plans had to be prepared in an accessible and manageable format and capable of updating and change in subsequent years. The plans also had to take account of the priorities in respect of marking in the national Tidy Towns' Competition which had been changed in the last two years to assess communities' activities in respect of environmental sustainability.

Following, the October event, Dr. MacGowan contacted all of the representatives who had shown an interest in plan preparation and arranged site visits to discuss ideas further.

Seven Tidy Towns' Committees finally signed up for preparation of BAPs as follows:

- Abbeyleix
- Ballacolla
- Cullohill
- Emo
- Killenard
- Mountmellick
- Portarlinton

The plans were prepared on the basis of work undertaken by Dr. MacGowan in gathering information on each area, discussions with representatives of each committee, site visits and listing of items and areas of interest. This resulted in the creation of action plans with short, medium and long-term targets which each committee.

Some people had attended Phase 1 but others had not. For example, no one from Portarlinton had attended the pre-July training, a few attended the launch of *Phase 2*, but none had had the opportunity to become familiar with the main concepts and issues presented in *Phase 1*.

This meant that the work done with the Portarlinton group at the first BAP planning session involved more discussion and development of a context before the actual detailed planning work could commence.

It also meant that, we had to adjust the content of the Biodiversity Action Plans, to take account of different levels of awareness of Biodiversity Concepts.

Because of the time of year, and because daylight hours were declining, Dr. MacGowan had to adjust the schedule of proposed workshops to accommodate people's availability. She let people know that she was available most weekday mornings and on Saturday mornings, but because of other people's timeframes, there was a considerable delay in this schedule.

It was also important that the training would involve site visits to reinforce the training messages. This meant that the schedule to complete training by the end of 2013 was not achievable and workshops continued through Spring, 2014. By working with groups during daylight hours, Fiona was able to identify the best locations for different biodiversity enhancing initiatives and local people can point out areas they would like to have highlighted. By visiting different sites at local level, the impact and importance of proper biodiversity planning has been enhanced and is more than a theoretical exercise. Because some of the groups include people who did not attend *Phase 1*, they can catch up with concepts and ideas by participating in actual site visits.

We also prepared an Information Leaflet for Tidy Towns' Committees for their meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2014 which was circulated by the official in Laois County Council responsible for supporting Tidy Town's Committees to those who could not attend this meeting.

The BAPS were prepared bearing in mind best practice from other locations and also tailored to the needs of the specific location. While the content of each differs because of local conditions, all BAPs have an introductory session about the basic concepts of biodiversity and ecology. In addition they contain the following:

1. Maps highlighting locations and habitats of interest
2. A list of proposed biodiversity-enhancing & biodiversity-maintaining actions to be carried out over the 2014-2017 period
3. Detailed management techniques for different habitats e.g. hedgerows; wildflower meadows etc.
4. Lists of native Irish plants recommended for planting in different habitats
5. Instructions for the construction of bird boxes, bat boxes and insect hotels
6. Recommended helpful reading, both books and websites
7. Lists of helpful contacts and organisations (with a view to helping keeping momentum going on the actions over the forthcoming years of the BAP)

Copies of the BAPs have already been provided to the partnership and are also being sent to the partnership as part of a package with this report.

## Conclusion

Kearney Consultants & MacGowan Associates are delighted to have been given this opportunity by Laois Partnership to deliver what we regard as very important training in Co. Laois. We believe that the participating organisations and individuals gained a lot from their participation in either or both phases. There is great scope to roll out future training based on our experience of this delivery. We would recommend that the content of any future training would focus on similar topics and issues but that the mode of delivery would be altered to maximise involvement and impact. There is great

opportunity to offer this training to other Tidy Towns' Committees throughout Co. Laois and further afield – not to mention – other interested groups and individuals. Given the emerging priorities at EU level with a focus on environment and conservation, this is a good time to consider a project of this type for delivery at local community level – possibly in partnership with the local authority and other agencies.

**Rita Kearney**, Manager, **Kearney Consultants & Trainers Ltd.**  
**Fiona MacGowan**, Consulting Ecologist, **MacGowan Associates**



# **Information Note for Tidy Towns' AGM February, 2014**

## Preparation of Biodiversity Action Plans for Tidy Towns' Committees, Co. Laois



Kearney Consultants asked Dr. Fiona MacGowan, Consulting Ecologist, to prepare Biodiversity Action Plans for local groups which were interested in preparing these to support local environmental planning for the future. The company had been contracted by **Laois Partnership Company** to raise awareness of the importance and value of biodiversity planning and to then work with interested individuals and groups to put local plans together.

In Phase 1, which was launched in May, 2013, by renowned Ecologist, Éanna Ní Lamhna in Vicarstown (thanks to Vicarstown!), Fiona delivered a series of training workshops/field trips in Spring/early Summer 2013 in 6 locations around the county. Eighteen sessions were held. These were very practical and hands-on and were the basis for the future work in late 2013/early 2014.

Balacolla Tidy Towns' Committee kindly hosted a launch of Phase 2 in October, 2013 and this was attended by a large group and presentations were made by Dr. Fiona MacGowan, Rita Kearney and Éamonn De Stafort, a highly regarded adjudicator of the National Tidy Towns' Competition. As a result of this session, a number of Tidy Towns' Committees signed up for Fiona to work with them on creating their own Biodiversity Action Plans. This process is nearing completion.

While the details of the BAPs differs from place to place, the main content includes: main Biodiversity concepts, biodiversity items to be addressed in the local plan and actions and their costs, hedgerow maintenance tips, various habitats' management regimes, helpful hints, local maps and sketches.

Each BAP is being presented in paper copy and in digital format so that the local group can adjust or add to it as time goes by. Those who have BAPs can use them to inform their plans for their entry to the next annual Tidy Towns' Competition. This is particularly important as the Marking Scheme in the competition focuses on actions which are focused on sustainable environmental practices and contributions to natural habitat conservation.

This initiative is due to be completed later in the Spring and Kearney Consultants and Dr. MacGowan would like to thank those who made it possible – Laois Partnership Company, Laois Co. Council and of course Tidy Towns' Committees and members of local environmental groups as well as interested individuals. Best wishes to you in all your endeavours!

**Rita Kearney**, Manager, **Kearney Consultants & Trainers Ltd.**  
**Fiona MacGowan**, Consulting Ecologist, **MacGowan Associates**

